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ABSTRACT

As new technologies expand the availability of information and services, previously isolated rural and small school libraries must begin to use formal evaluations to find out how best to serve their clientele. Although some forms of self-evaluation are ongoing, a library should ask for formal evaluations by its users, administration, and staff at least every 5 years. Evaluation must be based on stated objectives, thus forcing planning and goal setting. Barriers to evaluation include staff attitudes (discomfort with evaluation as a grading process), the complexity of overall evaluation, and the mistake of comparing program divisions that have very different goals. These barriers can be overcome by focusing on the impact of library programs and services on students or other patrons, and by breaking down the evaluation process into manageable tasks. A simple effective approach involves comparing measurable target goals or standards for each aspect of the library program with observations or input from staff and patrons about the current reality. Perhaps the greatest benefit of evaluation is the exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences between the library staff and its patrons. If the library holds no evaluations of its mission and programs, it will quickly lose touch with patron needs and become simply a depository. Sample questions are suggested for evaluation surveys of patrons, principals, faculty, and students. (SV)

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How Well is Your Library Doing What it Claims to be Doing?

With the reality of ever decreasing costs in technology, rural and small-school libraries are no longer isolated and distant from the library resources of large population centers. Via the Internet, CD-ROM programs and services, local, regional, and national networking opportunities, rural and small school libraries can be at the forefront of information and services for the patrons they are serving. How to find out how to best serve their clientele and remain a viable source of information and service, can be summed up in one word: evaluation.

How long has it been since your library has had a formal evaluation of its services and programs? If the answer to this question is not within the past five years, then it is overdue for an in-depth appraisal. Evaluation, by librarians, of library programs and services should be a continual effort as quality and quantity are never absolute but are constantly changing. However, within every five-year period, a library needs to ask its administration, its staff, and its clientele how well it is doing, suggestions for improvements, and what should be emphasized in the future.

It is absolutely necessary that evaluation be based on stated objectives. "Without measurable objectives and without the standards of expected performance to back them up, evaluation cannot really be meaningful, or a valid part of the feedback, self-improvement, and continuous quality control."[1]

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Thus, evaluation of library programs and services forces prior planning and goal setting. Tomorrow's libraries will be the result of today's planning," is a truism that must be grasped by every librarian.[2] Planning is the process of identifying goals (where do we want to be), developing programs or services to achieve those goals (how and when do we want to get there), and evaluating the success of those programs (are our programs leading us towards our goals?). Very simply, it is deciding what to do, how to do it, and who will do it. The entire process should be written down. Once the library's goals and objectives have been identified, then evaluative efforts become very informative, meaningful, and become a measurement of progress towards goal achievement.

Often evaluation brings to mind a grading process with which librarians are uncomfortable. If library programs, for which a person is responsible, are being evaluated, he/she is apt to feel that they are personally being judged. Thus, the attitude of the librarian(s) is often the most fundamental barrier to evaluation. Mae Graham, the Assistant Director of the Division of Library Extension at the Maryland State Department of Education, suggests that evaluation be thought of as the impact that the program or service is making, and helping determine the library's direction.[3] This is far more comprehensive outlook concerning evaluative efforts than attempting to grade a library on its programs.

Who does the evaluation? Everyone--continuously! It should never be a one-shot affair. Patron surveys or library questionnaires may be a singular occasion during an evaluation. However, each day as the librarian conducts tours, instructs classes in library skills, processes materials, etc., evaluation should occur. As each book is

handled, its state of repair can be noticed, its value to the curriculum or overall collection determined, etc. Improvements in processing, instruction, faculty involvement, etc., should and can be evaluated on a day-to-day basis.

Another barrier can be that of complication. Often to evaluate the entire library and all of its programs and services is to undertake too much at one time. Many times it is necessary and valuable to concentrate evaluative efforts on one program or one aspect at a time, which is a much more manageable task. Since evaluation is a continuous process, focusing on one aspect lends towards specific goal achievement.

A third barrier can be the mistake of comparing programs which have very different goals. Comparing the quantity and quality of a reference collection to that of the library's general collection could be apples and oranges. Patron vs. faculty usage of a library and other aspects, may have very different goals or outcomes. Also, quantity should seldom be evaluated by itself. Comparing numbers of what is available now with what was available previously gives a false sense of achievement which is often not realistic. As mentioned, a better comparison is what impact growth in the program or service has made upon students and patrons.

The author feels the following simple diagram to be very effective in efforts to evaluate library programs and services.

target	actual	difference

The target is (1) the area of the library you wish to evaluate and (2) the standards or goals you wish to achieve. It should be measurable (i.e., expressed in a number) or at least observable. Actual is the results of your evaluative efforts. It is reality, or where you actually are. The difference is that area which you need to work on to bring it in line with the target data, if the difference is negative, or a measurement of what you have achieved, if it is positive.[4]

Evaluation of the library by it's staff is all-important to ascertain the degree of success that the library has made towards its goals. Planning and evaluative meetings should be held on a regular basis by the staff for obvious reasons. However, looking through the eyes of library patrons, and trying to see the library as they see and use it, is the acid test. To the author, evaluative programs that do not have patron input are of limited value unless the evaluation is seeking an entirely different goal. Student, patron, faculty, and administrative feedback about library programs and services is essential if the library wishes to serve them well.

How is it Done?

Subjectively and objectively, formally and informally. Examples of numerous survey instruments are available in published texts, and are found in district, and state library offices. The author feels equally valid instruments can be drawn up by library staff members which are often more informative as to local community needs and resources. The following are a few sample questions for a community or school library evaluation, (not at all meant to be inclusive).

Patron Questions

1. The library should have a warm and inviting atmosphere. How would you rate the atmosphere of this library?

   Poor _____ Fair _____ Good _____ Excellent _____

2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (ten the most positive) how would you rank the helpfulness of the librarian(s)?

3. In the past month, how many times were you unable to find the materials you were seeking?

4. Please list suggestions you may have for improving the current library programs or services.

5. What additional services or programs would you recommend for inclusion in the library?

Library Evaluation by Principals

1. General appearance of the library.

   Poor _____ Fair _____ Good _____ Excellent _____

2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (ten being most positive), how would you rate the librarian-pupil relationships?

3. Is the library easily accessible before, during, and after school?

   Never _____ Sometimes _____ Often _____ Very Often _____

4. How would you evaluate the extent to which teachers and the librarian(s) serve students as to their interests and class assignments? (1-10) _____

5. Does the librarian inform teachers of new materials as they are acquired?

6. Does the librarian meet with faculty in curriculum planning or other meetings?

7. Does the librarian involve faculty members in the purchase of library materials?

Evaluation by Faculty

Do not know _____ Poor _____ Fair _____ Good _____ Excellent_____

1. Your students' attitudes about going to the library.

2. Adequacy of the collection for the subjects at the grade level for which you teach.

3. Adequacy of educational media and audio-visual equipment to your subject area(s).

4. Effectiveness of the reference collection for your subject area.

5. The library staff's efforts in giving you opportunities to suggest materials to be purchased.

6. Based on your observations, rate the effectiveness of instruction by the library staff with your classes in the library and audio-visual skills.

7. What ways do you feel the library can be improved?

Student Evaluation

1. Approximate number of times you came to the library last month.

2. How many times were you unable to find the materials you were seeking?

3. How many times you needed help finding materials.

4. If you did not come to the library as much as you wanted to, list the reason(s).

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest benefit that comes from an evaluation study is the exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences by the library staff and its patrons. Communication is always the most important product of evaluation. Everyone benefits when libraries know where they are going and what they need to do to get there. To meet the needs of your 1996-1997 students or clientele, you must meet the needs of a contemporary society. Though the purpose of any library or media program remains unaltered--that is to meet the informational needs of its users--the availability of programs and services were, in most cases, vastly different in 1991, (5 years ago) that what is available and cost effective for libraries today. "Technology has caused changes in every facet of library work---services, management, collection development, facilities, and personnel." [5]

The declining costs of direct access to online databases, indexing, and full-text retrieval through DC-ROM, the Internet, etc., allows the smallest library to access vast fields of information for students and patrons. Libraries throughout America are no longer tied to any physical environment or even to local populations.

One certainty is that your library patrons will become more and more aware of today's information services. If the library holds no evaluations concerning mission and programs, it will quickly lose touch with their needs and become simply a depository. That is not what libraries are all about.

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